

Using John Lewis's March Graphic Novel Trilogy in Middle School
Nicole L. Waid, State University of New York (SUNY)—Oneonta

Many adolescent learners' knowledge of the history comes from their social studies textbook. Misco (2014) posited that the organization of social studies content must encourage the students to engage in reflective learning activities that they can connect to real world experiences. Ogawa and Kusahara (2011) acknowledged that teachers often glean a significant part of their understanding of the social studies content from information in textbooks. Loewen (2008) pointed out that history is a collection of fascinating stories and suggested that telling the stories of the past could ignite the sense of wonderment in adolescent students that are absent in many students. Loewen felt the problem was the format of social studies textbooks.

Textbooks often struggle to not only illuminate the past, but they fail to use history to put contemporary issues into context. Despite middle school students' lack of motivation to read social studies textbooks, most adolescents are proficient in using an array of multimodal texts such as the movies, comics, and various internet sources (Draper & Reidel, 2011).

Using graphic novels in middle school social studies classes is a successful way to invigorate instruction. Serchay (2008) described graphic novels as nonfiction or fiction books that follow a similar format as comic books and typically tell a story from start to finish. Draper and Reidel (2011) explained that graphic novels engage middle school students by combining visual and verbal elements to bridge the gap between content from social studies and multimodal texts that students use outside of school. Using graphic novels as instructional tools could promote engagement during literacy-based activities. Graphic novels have emerged as an 'in demand' format with today's adolescents due to popular cable series like *The Walking Dead* and movies like *V for Vendetta*.

According to The Lexile Framework for Reading (2012) combining art and text helps engage struggling readers. Cromer and Clark (2007) noted that contemporary graphic novels' imagery and first-person accounts differ from traditional historical narratives third person. Graphic novels that focus on social studies content provide a narrative approach to social studies education that is more engaging to adolescent learners.

Graphic novels are useful resources that allow students to contextualize the information in the text. Contextualization refers to the student going beyond just comprehending the actual words found in the text to making connections to the historical period depicted in the graphic novel. This contextualization leads to a richer understanding how the events result in awareness of the historical period (Britt & Aglinskis, 2002). Boennan-Cornell (2015) made the contention that instructing students how to read a variety of primary and secondary texts using multiple approaches prepares them to analyze texts more critically. Zammit (2007) was in agreement with Boennan-Cornell's belief that using graphic novels prepares students to analyze texts more critically and added that it also enabled students to create similar documents to apply the higher level application skills to they gained from critically analyzing graphic novels.

With the emergence of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) teachers have to reevaluate their teaching practices to ensure that they are making the appropriate instructional shifts that make students college and career ready under the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. Lee and Swan (2013) identified two types of literacy instruction that attempt to address the instructional shifts that promote literacy in social studies; these areas are content area

reading and disciplinary literacy. Social studies teachers are well positioned to put texts into the context of the content area. Social studies instruction focuses on many primary and secondary sources, so refining students' content literacy skills are crucial. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) characterized disciplinary literacies as incorporating literacy skills that are critical to creating, communicating and comprehending academic knowledge. Each of the areas of social studies has different literacy skills that are necessary to analyze texts that are appropriate individual topics such as history, economics, and geography.

There have been multiple studies that examined the impact of using graphic novels in social studies instruction. Bosma, Rule, and Krueger (2013) conducted a study of 25 suburban middle school students who were studying the American Revolution. The activity divided students into four groups, and each group was instructed to read one book on the American Revolution over the span of four consecutive 40 minute periods. Students engaged in the reading exercise before receiving instruction on the American Revolution. Students in two of the groups read graphic novels about the Boston Massacre and Patrick Henry and read illustrated nonfiction texts on Paul Revere and the Boston Tea Party. The other two groups read graphic novels about Paul Revere and Boston Tea Party and read illustrated nonfiction books about the Boston Massacre and Patrick Henry. At the end of each day, the students answered a survey on a scale of one to ten to report how much they enjoyed the book and to measure their general interest in the topic. After two weeks, students compiled a list of five things they remembered about the book that their group read. That data obtained from the surveys suggested that shows students were able to recall more concepts and generalizations when reading graphic novels than to illustrated nonfiction texts. The findings also showed that students reported more enjoyment and interest were when reading the graphic novel as opposed to the illustrated nonfiction books.

Hawkins, Lopez, and Hughes (2016) discussed how to teachers in Illinois incorporated *John Lewis's March Books One and Two* (Lewis, Aydin & Powell, 2013, 2015) into two United States History mixed ability courses. The learning segments included pre-assessments that measured the students' background knowledge about the civil rights movement and posttests that measured the impact the graphic novels had on student learning.

The pretest revealed the students' apparent lack of knowledge about the pioneers of the civil rights movement and the struggles that Americans faced in their quest for civil rights. The students in both classes read *March Book One* and *March Book Two* in conjunction with classroom notes and instruction. The teachers used the graphic novels to scaffold instruction on literacy skills while addressing the historical content. One class used a guided learning packet that stressed vocabulary associated with the civil rights movement such as segregation, civil disobedience, March on Washington, and Freedom Rides. Instructed to define the words using context cues and direct quotations from the graphic novels.

The final part of the activity was student generated projects about the civil rights movement using evidence from the graphic novels as well as other primary and secondary sources. The students synthesized the information from multiple sources to demonstrate their knowledge of the civil rights era after reading the graphic novels.

The second United States History class read excerpts from both graphic novels as a supplement to classroom instruction and analyzing various primary and secondary sources. The students read *March Book Two* independently and noted key themes using a graphic organizer. The students noted the chronology of the events in the book and then worked in small groups to discuss why the book started and ended the way that they did. The second group also compared and contrasted the

different perspectives from other primary and secondary sources on the civil rights era.

After the unit on social change was completed students completed the same questions about their knowledge of the civil rights movement. The students' level of content knowledge of about civil rights era was increased dramatically after being exposed to March Book 2 and the other sources. The teachers saw the benefit of taking the instructional time to teach students how to read graphic novels because the use of graphic novels invigorated the instruction on racial justice (Hawkins, Lopez, & Hughes, 2016).

The New York City Department of Education has announced that the March trilogy (Lewis, Aydin & Powell, 2013,2015, 2016) will be used to teach about the civil rights movement. Many strategies could be implemented using the March trilogy. Loewen's (2008) critique of textbooks suggests that books do not put contemporary issues into context to make the information more compelling to adolescent learners. Using the C3 Framework could make the problem of civil rights more compelling.

The C3 Framework includes four elements:

1. Developing questions that act as the basis of historical inquiry,
2. Applying content reading and disciplinary literacy skills,
3. Evaluating and gathering evidence
4. Making evidence-based claims and taking informed action

(The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards retrieved from <http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/c3/C3-Framework-for-Social-Studies.pdf>).

Before students begin studying the civil rights movement, the teacher should do a pre-assessment to measure what they know about the civil rights movement. A KWL chart would be a useful tool for determining what background knowledge students have about the civil rights era. Once students fill out the K column the teacher would present the class with current events related to civil rights. The current events for this portion of the activity could include stories involving protests by Black Lives Matter activists and Colin Kaepernick, voter identification court rulings, gerrymandering and police violence against black people. Discussing contemporary issues related to civil rights will put the struggle for civil rights into a context that student could relate to everyday life. Class discussions about contemporary issues might lead to questions about civil rights. Students would come up with questions they would like to know about civil rights in the W column of the KWL chart. Compelling questions are questions that students use as the basis of their inquiries. If students can participate in the formation of the compelling questions employed in historical investigations, they may be more motivated to find answers that will answer their questions by using evidence-based claims.

Once students complete the K and W of their KWL chart, students would work in three groups. Each group would be assigned either March Book 1 (Lewis, Aydin & Powell, 2013), March Book 2 (Lewis, Aydin & Powell, 2015) or March Book 3 (Lewis, Aydin & Powell, 2016). The students will discuss the questions they generated in the W column of their KWL chart to find any commonalities that exist. The groups will select one compelling question that will act as the basis for their historical inquiry and select supporting queries which support the compelling questions. Rothstein and Santana (2011) discussed the Question Formation Technique which helps students generate questions, refine their questions to make them more open-ended, prioritize the queries and formulating a plan to answer the questions.

The teacher would supply each group with supporting documents for each graphic novel. For

example, additional primary and secondary sources related to sit-ins would supplement **March Book 1** (Lewis, Aydin & Powell, 2013). Sources about the Freedom Rides would strengthen **March Book 2** (Lewis, Aydin & Powell, 2015). Documents relating to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would supply additional information for **March Book 3** (Lewis, Aydin & Powell, 2016). The teacher would provide scaffold questions for the supporting documents and a graphic organizer to record evidence to substantiate the claims they would make at the end of the inquiry. Students in each group would answer the scaffold questions and discuss the responses in their groups to determine how the answers fit into their set of questions. Students in each group would read their assigned graphic novel and create a timeline to make a precise sequence of events. Once the scaffold questions, graphic organizers, and timelines are complete; students discuss the evidence they gathered from all the sources. The group would answer their compelling and support questions and then create their graphic novels that address their compelling questions.

Each group would present their graphic novels to the other two groups in the class. After all of the student-created graphic novels are presented, the students will fill in the L column of their KWL charts. If any questions remain unanswered after the presentations, they could be addressed in a class discussion. At the end of the March trilogy unit, students would brainstorm actions to improve civil rights in contemporary America.

Using the March trilogy in social studies classes when addressing civil rights in the United States could invigorate instruction by combining words and visuals to examine key events in the civil rights movements. Seeing images and text help motivate students to be more engaged because the story comes alive in a way that does not occur in traditional textbooks. Loewen (2008) felt that textbooks failed to address the fascinating stories that exist in United States History. The March trilogy tells John Lewis's fascinating stories, and brings the conversation on civil rights into a real world context for the 21st century learner.

References

Boennan-Cornell, W. (2015). Using historic graphic novels in high school history classes: Potential for contextualization, sourcing, and corroborating. *History Teacher*, 48(2), 209-224.

Bosma, K., Rule, A. A., & Krueger, K. S. (2013). Social studies content reading about the American Revolution enhanced with graphic novels. *Social Studies Research & Practice*, 8(1), 59-76.

Britt, M. A. & Aglinskias, C. (2002) Improving students' ability to identify and use source information. *Cognition and Instruction* 20(4), 485-522.

Cromer, M. & Clark, P. (2007). Getting graphic with the past: Graphic novels and the teaching of history. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 35 (4), 574-591.

Draper, C.A. & Reidel, M. (2011). One nation, going graphic: Using graphic novels to promote critical literacy in social studies classrooms. *Ohio Social Studies Review*, 47(2), 3-12.

Hawkins, M., Lopez, K., Hughes, R.L.(2016). John Lewis's March, Book Two: Assessing the impact of a graphic novel on teaching the civil rights movement. *Social Education*, 80 (3), p. 151-156.

Lee, J., Swan, K. (2013). Is the Common Core good for social studies? Yes, but... *Social Education* 77(6), p. 327-330.

Lewis, J., Aydin, A. & Powell, N. (2013). *March, Book One*. Marietta, Ga.: Top Shelf.

Lewis, J., Aydin, A. & Powell, N. (2015). *March, Book Two*. Marietta, Ga.: Top Shelf.

Lewis, J., Aydin, A. & Powell, N. (2016). *March, Book Three*. Marietta, Ga.: Top Shelf.

Loewen, J. W. (2008) *Lies my teacher told me: Everything your American history textbook got wrong* New York: New Press.

Misco, T. (2014). Powerful social studies unit design: A companion to powerful social studies teaching and learning. *Clearing House*. 87(6), p. 241.

Ogawa, M., Kusahara, K. (2011). 30 years after the 1981 Japan/United States textbook study project: How are they portrayed? Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 10, 2011, New Orleans, LA.

Randall, R., Marangell, J. (2016). Improving on past practice: Embracing a new direction in secondary social studies teaching and learning. *History Teacher* 49(3), p.383-396.

Serchay, D. S. (2008). *Graphic novels for children and tweens*. New York, NY: Neal-Shuman.

Shanahan, T., Shanahan, C. (2008). Teaching disciplinary literacy to adolescents: Rethinking content area literacy," *Harvard Educational Review* 78, p.40-59.

Zammit, K. (2007). Popular culture in the classroom: Interpreting and creating multimodal texts. In R. Whittaker, M. O'Donnell, & A. McCabe (Eds.), *Advances in language and education* (p. 60–76). New York, NY: Continuum.

Web-Based References

Rothstein, D., Santana, L. (2011). Teaching students to ask their own questions. *Harvard Education Letter*, 27(5), retrieved from http://hepg.org/helhome/issues/27_5/helarticle/teaching-students-toask-their-own-questions_507.

National Council for the Social Studies (2013). The college, career, and civic life (C3) framework for social studies state standards retrieved from <http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/c3/C3Framework-for-Social-Studies.pdf>.

The Lexile Framework for Reading. (2012). How to help a struggling reader. Retrieved from <http://lexile.com/using-lexile/lexile-at-home/howto-help-a-strugglingreader/>